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Hibben, John Grier

The type of the graduate student

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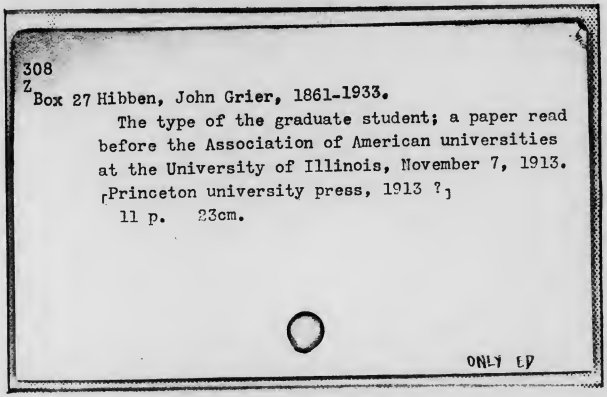

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June 1915

THE TYPE OF THE GRADUATE STUDENT

BY

JOHN GRIER HIBBEN

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THE TYPE OF THE GRADUATE STUDENT

BY

JOHN GRIER HIBBEN

PRESIDENT OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

A PAPER

READ BEFORE THE
ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES
AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

NOVEMBER 7, 1913

MAR. 30, 1916 - 13.03

THE TYPE OF THE GRADUATE STUDENT

In the development of the species of any organism there is always a typical form, which represents the prevailing tendencies at work in producing and maintaining it. Where purely mechanical forces are operative, it is possible to preserve an absolute uniformity of type with no variation from a completely monotonous product. The stamp of the machine appears on every article of its unvarying output. Where there are living forces, however, the central type maintains its characteristic position in the midst of a large number of variations from it. The type may be considered as the resultant of all the constant forces at work which are conspiring to produce it, and which therefore may be regarded as a diagnostic symptom of those concealed tendencies to which its characteristic features are due.

The graduate student develops within a system of academic forces which exert a constant influence upon his ambition, his idea of a scholar's vocation, his habits of study, his methods of research, and thus set a limit to his possible attainment. The presence of a marked individuality may transcend the influence of these forces and enable the student to manifest a superior order of excellence. It is also true on the other hand that variations from this general type may manifest themselves in an opposite way and show an obvious inferiority of attainment.

The question naturally suggests itself as to what, in the academic world to-day, are the determining forces which tend to constitute a definite type of graduate student. These forces cannot be determined by any biometric method. Their operation produces qualitative rather than quantitative differences—and yet it is quite pertinent to inquire concerning the ground of these qualitative differences which give character to the type. They all may be traced back to a single

source in the expectation which prevails in university circles of a certain kind of work which the graduate student must successfully accomplish, and which sets a programme for his studies and for the general habit of his life. This expectation makes prominent the necessity of the graduate student being so trained in the line of his specialty that he will be able to acquire expert knowledge concerning some specifically defined field of investigation, and thus qualify to speak with authority concerning the things he knows. In many cases of course the graduate student is looking forward to the taking of his doctor's degree, and to that end he naturally bends his energies to accumulate as abundant and valuable material as possible for his doctor's dissertation. In other words, he has a special field of work before him and a special subject within the special field. Everything is to be sacrificed for his peculiarly intensive labors.

There is a demand also in certain quarters that in the pursuit of knowledge within this limited area the graduate student should give evidence of some aptitude for original discovery. These expectations he finds in the very atmosphere about him, wherein his special studies are to be pursued. This determines in some essential sense the general mode of scholarly procedure and the general nature of scholarly attainment. The type is largely determined by the influences. It is of course, obvious even to a very superficial inquirer, that the type thus produced has its conspicuous defects and limitations.

The restricted field of investigation demanding an intensity of sustained application and concentrated attention is in itself conducive to a narrowing of interest, to a limiting of the sources of knowledge, and a circumscribing of the range of scholarly ambition and appreciation. The very success, moreover, which may attend the special inquirer may lead him to indulge in a spirit of pedantry, which is always to be regarded as a symptom of defect or disease in scholarship. There is also a certain Pharisaism which is a sure indication of superficial attainment. The pharisaical spirit which indulges in the complacent contemplation of one's own attainment is wholly devoid of that true sense of proportion which enables a man rightly to view his own knowledge in reference both to the known and the unknown. There is also in these graduate years of study a tendency to bring about an aloofness of scholarship, a detachment from the world of human affairs and activity, and a dearth of human sympathies. It is an obvious economic loss to develop the mind at the sacrifice of the man. All of these dangers and drawbacks incident to the necessary perfecting of oneself in his specialty may be overcome by the stronger personalities among our graduate students. When this is the case we have a conspicuous variation from the type which we all admire.

We must recognize, however, that variations from the type do not necessarily affect the stability and permanency of the type itself, nor modify its salient features. There is always the possibility of the appearance of extreme cases, and yet the type withal remains the same. If any change is to be brought about in the type it is the constant and central forces in operation tending to produce the type which must themselves experience some radical modification. Where in any development the phenomenon appears which is known as progression of the type, there is always a tendency among the typical forms to fashion themselves according to those extreme cases of variation which show essential superiority. To secure a true progression of type therefore there must be some modification of the essential determinants among the controlling influences. Naturally progress in university experience is realized only when a progressive type can be maintained. The question suggests itself in reference to the particular subject under discussion,—How is it possible to secure this improvement of the graduate student type? The type we have seen is due in general to the expectation which

has been created in the university world as to the kind of excellence which is in demand. Therefore, if it is possible to create an atmosphere of expectation as regards a higher order of attainment, influences will appear and prevail which will assure the progress of the type.

Towards this end it seems to me that we who have the responsibility of directing the studies of our graduate students should insist that whatever may be the area of knowledge which they choose for their special field of investigation, they should learn to correlate it with the great central subject of their studies. At the very beginning of his graduate years the student should understand that he will be required to interpret the results of his research in the light of the whole body of knowledge. He should never forget that the scholar is not the collector merely, but the interpreter of knowledge as well.

This expectation we can enforce, moreover, by a very careful endeavor on our part to make the final examination of a student for the doctor's degree as comprehensive as possible. Such an examination should test the student upon his general knowledge of the literature of his subject, of its historical development, of its determining laws and of the standards by means of which he is able to reach a discerning judgment and a critical estimate of all that pertains to its essential significance. The supreme test of the skill of the teacher is his ability to conduct a doctor's examination and by his questions reveal the wealth or the poverty of the candidate's scholarly resources; in some cases the poverty or the wealth of the teacher's resources also. It would be well, moreover, to induce the student to choose a subject for his doctor's dissertation which will necessarily compel him, in order to master it, to make excursions far afield into the neighboring territories of knowledge.

The true scholar must also have the spirit as well as the letter of knowledge. There must be something in his nature

that will respond with enthusiasm to the unfolding of truth in its infinitely various forms before his inquiring observation. There should be such an appreciative sense of its value as to command his enthusiasm and devotion. He should possess, also, the ability to relate the truth he discovers to life itself, and to give it that scope and play in his experience which will exert its transforming power upon life's interests and activities. There are some subjects it is true which will be seen to bear directly upon the problems of living, such as the study of social and political conditions, or of history, or of philosophy. There are other subjects, however, which have only an indirect reference to the daily problems of existence. But no truth swings entirely clear of life, and any body of ideas, however abstract and seemingly removed from concrete experience, nevertheless will be found to possess a transforming power in reference to the mind and character of the scholar who entertains them as his familiar companions. They will at least tend to quicken the thought and furnish the mind with a sensitized surface capable of receiving upon it the impressions of the human world from whose contact it cannot escape.

In those elements of knowledge which are merely mechanical there must be some power of the mind to organize the various items of fact into a living whole. Where there is life there is always creative power. The spirit of knowledge eludes definition. There is no formula which expresses or explains it, but it is possible for a university to create the expectation that anyone who may cherish the ambition to become a scholar should early in his career give evidence that for him the tree of knowledge is veritably a tree of life.

The humanistic strain in the spirit of the scholar may be produced by the study of science as well as that of the classics, or of philosophy or of art. Wherever there is intellectual striving an expansion of the mind results. This in itself should normally stimulate human sympathies and enlarge the

range of human interests, for this mental development is chiefly brought about through contact with other minds, not only of one's contemporaries but of other ages and of other races. This should create a sense of mutual dependence and thus make possible a true brotherhood of scholarship.

We know that knowledge is power, but it becomes efficient power only when one has learned the secret of applying it to the concrete experiences of life. One may possess a whole world of knowledge and have behind him a world of experience; but if this world is detached from the actual conditions and circumstances of life, it is of no avail. The scholar must acquire not only knowledge, but also wisdom, which is the art of directing knowledge to a worthy end. One must learn the secret of applying his knowledge to human needs. To instruct, to persuade, to control men there must be an understanding of their nature and disposition, and the success or failure of most persons will be determined by their ability to deal with men. Whatever may be one's profession or calling, human contacts are inevitable. Even the most technical branches of knowledge, which seem far remote from any human relation or significance whatsoever, are not free from this human factor. The men who are to pursue the technical professions after their studies have been finished are peculiarly dependent upon their knowledge of their fellowmen. For the activities of their daily work will bring them in close touch with the human elements with which they must deal, and which they must learn how to control wisely and efficiently.

This relation of the graduate student to the human conditions of his life's work is peculiarly significant as regards the position and function of the teacher. It is of imperative necessity that our graduate students who are looking forward to the profession of teaching should have about them the possibilities of daily companionship. Talent may be developed in secret, but character only in the stream of the world, as one who knew well the possibilities of human nature has so

profoundly observed. Surroundings should be provided which will bring together in one common life men of various temperaments, tastes and aptitudes, whose studies lie in various fields of knowledge, so that they may become mutually helpful one to another through the daily commerce of thought.

Again the graduate student should be led by all the influences of his studies to such a reverence for the might and majesty of truth that he will himself show the spirit of humility as he walks within the courts of knowledge. The scholar should possess a masterful grasp of the truth and should speak with the voice of authority, but this is not incompatible with a docile spirit. Docility is the necessary condition of progress in scholarship. The pride of scholarly attainment is as deplorable as the pride of material possession. The intellectual Pharisee could not possibly see himself bulk so large were it not that the world of knowledge appears to him so exceedingly small. Whatever superiority a man may attain on account of his scholarship should be very humbly and reverently devoted to the enlightenment of his less highly favored fellows. If he feels a responsibility for the use of his intellectual powers, he will not waste much time in the fruitless occupation of contemplating and admiring them. He will then recognize the truth that his learning is not to be prostituted in the vain exploitation of himself, but in the humble service of the world.

Moreover, in the pursuit of any investigation which a graduate student undertakes, he should have clearly before him the difference between discovery and rediscovery. Too much emphasis has been put upon the test of discovery as regards the ability of the special research student. It is not absolutely essential that in the studies of a scholar some new discovery should be made. The progress of scholarship is often along the lines of rediscovering for himself that which has been known to the world of thought. The main question, it seems to me, is this,—Does a scholar's research furnish a

new centre of illumination to lighten the path of his progress? Is his increasing knowledge a lamp to his feet? It is too great a demand upon him that he should discover an absolutely new light. It is sufficient in many cases if he can gain a new reflection from some old and constant source of illumination. Much is gained when the student has learned to maintain his independence of thought, even though he has no power of original production.

We hear much to-day of the demand for productive scholarship. Productive scholarship, however, has to be tested by the value of the product. It is not sufficient to say of a man's accomplishment merely that it is a work well done. To estimate it at its full value, we should be able to assure ourselves also that it is worth doing. It is urged that in the search after something new and original, whether one succeeds or not, at least habits of work, devices of experimentation, methods of exact scholarship, are acquired and can be acquired only in this way. This is all true and the spirit of research should be encouraged in every way. But the exclusive desire to discover something new and in an original way has its dangers and often leads to purely mechanical methods of investigation. And our studies will become mechanical, unless we bring to our task a richly furnished mind, conversant with the great thoughts of the great men who have marked out the boundaries and have built the highways of the territory embraced by the general subject which we are investigating. We may go into the byways of knowledge and push our inquiries beyond the frontiers, blazing a trail patiently and perseveringly into the region of the unknown; but from time to time it is necessary to seek the high places, whence we may be able to gain a vision of those widely extending fields, which have already been won for man's knowledge and use.

There is a prevalent fallacy that after the foundation of general knowledge has been securely grounded, we can then give our whole time and attention to building the superstructure of our specialty, and that questions of general knowledge in the domain of our subject may well cease to interest us, and can be eliminated from our thoughts and pursuits. I am firmly convinced however that quite the opposite is the case,—that we can only satisfactorily build up our specialty when we are constantly buttressing it by our growing knowledge of the general subject in which our specialty falls. I would emphasize this point particularly, that knowledge is to be regarded as a buttress as well as a foundation. Towards this end we should endeavor to impress upon the graduate student from the very beginning of his studies the necessity of developing the complementary powers of his mind. There should be an endeavor to balance the faculty of penetration with that of vision, process of analysis with synthesis, experiment with theory, fact with law, and the knowledge of the particular case with an appreciation of its universal significance. True scholarship has power within itself to correct its own limitations, if there is only the passion for knowledge and the unwearying zeal to possess it.

The one whose self-discipline has produced a finely tempered intellect, who is possessed by the love of truth and counts no sacrifice too great in pursuit of it, who keenly scents the source of explanation in the concealed cause, who has acquired the habit of accurate observation and exact statement, who has learned the secret of making every stream of knowledge tributary to his particular specialty, who is accustomed to reserve his judgment until he is able to see the obverse side of the shield, who has a true sense of values, who knows how to preserve a proper balance among his own mental powers, skilled in the art of humanizing knowledge and breathing upon it the breath of life,—this man has attained the full measure of the stature of the scholar.

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